

TESTIMONY

Getting Back on Track in Afghanistan

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Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia on April 2, 2008

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Getting Back on Track in Afghanistan²

**Before the Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia
United States House of Representatives**

April 2, 2008

I have just returned from my most recent trip to Afghanistan in March 2008, where I visited U.S. forces in the east. The situation in Afghanistan and neighboring Pakistan is at a critical juncture. In 2001, approximately 100 Central Intelligence Agency officers, 350 U.S. Special Forces soldiers, and 15,000 Afghans overthrew the Taliban regime in less than three months while suffering only a dozen U.S. casualties. They were supported by as many as 100 U.S. combat sorties per day. Some individuals involved in the operation argued that it revitalized the American way of war.³

This initial success, however, transitioned into an insurgency as the Taliban and other groups began a sustained effort to overthrow the Afghan government. The increase in violence was particularly acute between 2005 and 2006, when the number of suicide attacks quintupled from 27 to 139; remotely detonated bombings more than doubled from 783 to 1,677; and armed attacks nearly tripled from 1,558 to 4,542.⁴ According to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, violence rose another 27 percent between 2006 and 2007.⁵ The spread of the Taliban, al-Qa'ida, and other militant groups in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province, Federally Administered Tribal Areas, Baluchistan Province, and urban areas also had serious repercussions for Afghanistan and the United States more broadly. As the *2008 Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence* argued, "Using the sanctuary in the border area of Pakistan, al-Qa'ida has been able to maintain a cadre of skilled lieutenants capable of directing the organization's operations around the world."⁶

¹ The opinions and conclusions expressed in this testimony are the author's alone and should not be interpreted as representing those of RAND or any of the sponsors of its research. This product is part of the RAND Corporation testimony series. RAND testimonies record testimony presented by RAND associates to federal, state, or local legislative committees; government-appointed commissions and panels; and private review and oversight bodies. The RAND Corporation is a nonprofit research organization providing objective analysis and effective solutions that address the challenges facing the public and private sectors around the world. RAND's publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors.

² This testimony is available for free download at <http://www.rand.org/pubs/testimonies/CT301/>.

³ Henry A. Crumpton, "Intelligence and War: Afghanistan, 2001-2002," in Jennifer E. Sims and Burton Gerber, eds., *Transforming U.S. Intelligence* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2005), p. 177.

⁴ Pamela Constable, "Gates Visits Kabul, Cites Rise in Cross Border Attacks: Defense Secretary May Recommend More U.S. Troops," *Washington Post*, January 17, 2007. On the deteriorating security environment see also Barnett R. Rubin, "Saving Afghanistan," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (January / February 2007), pp. 57-78.

⁵ The data come from Admiral Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. See, for example, Ed Johnson, "Gates Wants NATO to Reorganize Afghanistan Mission," *Bloomberg News*, December 12, 2007.

⁶ J. Michael McConnell, *Annual Threat Assessment of the Director of National Intelligence* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, February 2008), p. 6.

But there have been some positive trends. Afghanistan's economy continues to grow, as real gross domestic product increased by 14 percent in 2005, 7.5 percent in 2006, and an estimated 13 percent in 2007. Inflation also remains low at 12.3 percent in 2005, 5.1 percent in 2006, and 8.3 percent in 2007.⁷ In addition, primary school enrollment rose from 19 percent in 2001 to 87 percent in 2005.⁸ The security situation also has improved somewhat in several provinces in the east, NATO has helped preserve a fragile peace so far in the north, and U.S. and NATO forces have helped capture or kill key Taliban leaders (such as Mullah Dadullah Lang and Mullah Mansoor Dadullah) and al Qa'ida operatives (such as Abu Laith al Libbi).

In light of the Committee's focus on developing an integrated strategy for Afghanistan, my comments will be divided into three parts. The first examines the rise of Afghanistan's insurgency, the second discusses international cooperation, and the third outlines room for improvement.

I. Strategic Challenges

What explains the rise of Afghanistan's insurgency? As with most insurgencies, the critical precondition is the collapse of governance. The Afghan government has faced challenges providing basic services to the population; its security forces, especially police, have had difficulties establishing law and order; and too few international forces have been available to fill the gap.

The new Afghan government has had difficulty providing essential services to the population, especially in rural areas of the country. As one World Bank study concluded, the primary beneficiaries of assistance have been the urban elite.⁹ This has triggered deep-seated frustration and resentment among the rural population. Indeed, the Afghan government has suffered from a number of systemic problems, and has had difficulty attracting and retaining skilled professionals with management and administrative experience. Weak administration and lack of control in some provinces has made tax policy and administration virtually impossible. In many rural areas, the government made no effort to collect taxes.

Electricity is a good example. In 2005, only 6 percent of the Afghan population had access to power from the electricity grid.¹⁰ And most of it was characterized by low voltage, intermittent supply, and blackouts. The dire situation reflected a lack of investment by the government and

⁷ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook* (Washington, DC: International Monetary Fund, October 2007), pp. 221, 227.

⁸ Central Intelligence Agency, *The World Factbook* (Washington, DC: Central Intelligence Agency, 2008).

⁹ World Bank, *Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty* (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2005), p. xxvi.

¹⁰ World Bank, *Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty*, p. 83.

international community, as well as poor maintenance. In addition to insufficient generation capacity (which was augmented by imports of power from neighboring countries), the system was plagued by inadequate transmission, poor distribution, and lack of backup equipment. And most efforts focused on supplying electricity in urban areas of the country, not on targeting rural areas in danger of falling to the Taliban. The Afghan government's electricity strategy was to "increase coverage of the electricity grid in urban areas to 90 percent by 2015."¹¹ For those rich enough to buy generators, electricity was not a problem. The striking feature of Afghanistan's economic structure was the dominance of the informal sector. A large portion of the electricity supply, for example, was provided by small-scale generators.¹² The result was significant. As one World Bank assessment noted, "The bulk of Afghans still do not have a reliable electric power supply and clean water. Thus the situation that prevailed in the 1970s and during the long period of conflict – basic social services not reaching most of Afghanistan's people – has not yet been fundamentally changed with the partial exception of primary education."¹³

In addition, the Afghan government has faced challenges providing security outside of the capital. A major reason has been the poor state of the Afghan National Police. The result has been a weak security apparatus that can not establish a monopoly of the legitimate use of force within the country. The police were not an international priority after the overthrow of the Taliban regime, and they received significantly less money and attention than the army. The United States declined to provide significant assistance to the Afghan police in the aftermath of the Taliban's overthrow, and handed police training over to the Germans. By 2003, however, U.S. officials at the State Department, Defense Department, and White House began to argue that the German effort was far too slow, trained too few police officers, and was seriously underfunded.

Consequently, the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement contracted DynCorp International to train the police. But by 2004, officials in the White House and the Department of Defense expressed concern that the State Department effort was failing. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld wrote a series of "snowflakes" expressing concern that the police program was undermining U.S. and broader NATO counterinsurgency efforts.¹⁴ Key problems included the failure to conduct follow-on mentoring of Afghan police, to provide significant institutional reform in the Ministry of Interior, and to curb deep-seated corruption in the police and Ministry of Interior. In 2005 the U.S. military took the lead in providing training, equipment, and other assistance to the Afghan National Police.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 86.

¹² World Bank, *Afghanistan: State Building, Sustaining Growth, and Reducing Poverty*, Report No. 29551-AF (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2004), pp. 5, 16.

¹³ Ibid., p. 99.

¹⁴ Secretary Rumsfeld's "snowflakes" were internal memos to his staff, and he sometimes produced as many as 60 snowflakes per day.

Nevertheless, the competence of the Afghan police remained low. As a German assessment of the border police noted in 2006, “Neither the Afghan border police nor the customs authorities are currently in a position to meet the challenges presented by this long border.”¹⁵ Internal U.S. government documents expressed deepening alarm at the state of the Afghan police. A report by the Offices of Inspector General of the U.S. Departments of State and Defense concluded that the Afghan police’s “readiness level to carry out its internal security and conventional police responsibilities is far from adequate. The obstacles to establish a fully professional [Afghan National Police] are formidable.” It found that key obstacles included “no effective field training officer (FTO) program, illiterate recruits, a history of low pay and pervasive corruption, and an insecure environment.”¹⁶ The Afghan police were needed to help establish order in urban and rural areas. But they were heavily outgunned by insurgent forces, plagued by corruption, and lacked any semblance of a national police infrastructure. They lacked uniforms, armored vehicles, weapons, ammunition, police stations, police jails, national command and control, and investigative training.¹⁷ An Afghan trucker put it succinctly: “Forget about the Taliban, our biggest problems are with the police.”¹⁸

U.S. force levels have also been low, increasing the security vacuum in much of rural Afghanistan. The number of U.S. troops per capita in Afghanistan has been significantly less than almost every nation-building effort since World War II.¹⁹ U.S. military officials adopted a “light footprint” approach for at least two reasons: they wanted to prevent large-scale resistance similar to what the Soviet Union encountered in Afghanistan in the 1980s; and they believed that small numbers of ground troops and the use of airpower were sufficient to ensure security.²⁰ U.S. Gen. Tommy Franks, who developed the operational concept for Afghanistan in 2001, argued that after major combat ended, “our footprint had to be small, for both military and geopolitical reasons. I envisioned a total of

¹⁵ Government of Germany, *Assessment of Doha II Conference on Border Management in Afghanistan: A Regional Approach* (Berlin: Government of Germany, 2006), p. 2.

¹⁶ Inspectors General, U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Defense, *Interagency Assessment of Afghanistan Police Training and Readiness* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of State and U.S. Department of Defense, 2006), p. 1.

¹⁷ General Barry R. McCaffrey (ret.), Memorandum of Trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan to Colonel Mike Meese and Colonel Cindy Jebb, United States Military Academy, June 2006; and General Barry R. McCaffrey (ret.), Memorandum of Trip to Afghanistan and Pakistan to Colonel Mike Meese and Colonel Cindy Jebb, United States Military Academy, February 2007.

¹⁸ Quoted in Chris Sands, “Bring Back Taliban to End Police Corruption, Say Afghan Truckers,” *The Independent* (London), May 10, 2007.

¹⁹ James Dobbins, Seth G. Jones, Keith Crane, Andrew Rathmell, Brett Steele, Richard Teltschik, and Anga Timilsina, *The UN’s Role In Nation-Building: From the Congo to Iraq* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2005).

²⁰ Dobbins, author by interview, Washington, D.C., September 21, 2004; Richard A. Clarke, *Against All Enemies: Inside America’s War on Terror* (New York: Free Press, 2004); U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, *Afghanistan Stabilization and Reconstruction: A Status Report*, hearing before the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 108th Cong., 2d sess., January 27, 2004, pp. 14, 17-18; Seymour M. Hersh, “The Other War: Why Bush’s Afghanistan Problem Won’t Go Away,” *New Yorker*, April 12, 2004; and “Report of the Secretary-General on the Situation in Afghanistan and Its Implications for International Peace and Security,” UN Doc A/56/875-S/2002/278, para. 98.

about 10,000 American soldiers, airmen, special operators, and helicopter assault crews, along with robust in-country close air support.”²¹ This small footprint was inevitable once planning for U.S. operations in Iraq began. But it was insufficient to establish security in Afghanistan.

In addition, insurgents have established a sanctuary in neighboring Pakistan. Every major insurgent group – such as the Taliban, Haqqani network, Hezb-i-Islami, and al Qa’ida – has established a command-and-control apparatus on the Pakistani side of the border. Al Qa’ida poses a particular concern because of its international scope. It has a core membership, not counting the Uzbek presence, of several hundred people clustered in such Pakistan tribal agencies as North Waziristan, South Waziristan, and Bajaur. Al Qa’ida takes advantage of other militant groups’ networks to operate in settled areas of Pakistan. It has revitalized itself and returned to the operating style it enjoyed prior to 9/11. Leadership is divided among functional shura councils, covering such areas as military, political, financial, and media affairs. Finally, parts of the Pakistan government – especially current members of the Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) Directorate and Frontier Corps – continue to provide support to the Taliban and Haqqani network.

II. International Cooperation

The U.S. experience working with coalition forces and other international actors has been mixed. The counterinsurgency campaign – and security sector reform more broadly – was initially based on a “lead nation” approach. The United States was the lead donor nation for reconstructing the Afghan National Army; Germany was lead for police; the United Kingdom was lead for counter-narcotics; Italy was lead for justice; and Japan (with UN assistance) was lead for the disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of former combatants. In theory, each lead nation was supposed to contribute significant financial assistance, coordinate external assistance, and oversee reconstruction efforts in its sector. In practice, this approach did not work as well as envisioned. The United States provided the bulk of assistance in most security sectors – including counternarcotics, police, and the army. In other areas, such as the justice sector, there was little measurable improvement.

NATO’s forces in Afghanistan have generally been competent. But the NATO experience in Afghanistan highlights several drawbacks with multilateral operations. One is the variation in political will of coalition partners. NATO’s International Security Assistance Force has been severely limited by political-military rules of engagement, which constrain many of the national contingents. Some countries, such as Canada and Britain, have been reliable allies who are willing to fight and die in Afghanistan. Another drawback is the variation in capabilities. Several coalition

²¹ General Tommy Franks, *American Soldier* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), p. 324.

countries lack adequate enabler forces – including attack and lift helicopters, smart munitions, intelligence, engineers, medical, logistics, and digital command and control – to fully leverage and sustain their ground combat power.

The United States' repeated calls to other NATO countries for help have fallen on deaf ears. Former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld likened the situation to a basketball team that practices for six months, only to find that most of its players won't play when the game begins. Germany, Italy, Spain, Greece, Turkey, and a range of other NATO countries have repeatedly balked at providing troops for counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan's violent south. This decision has created a two-tiered NATO composed of those involved in ground combat (such as the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, and the Netherlands), and those who are not (every one else).

Two factors are at work. First, some NATO countries have a different philosophy about how to operate in Afghanistan. German, Italian, Spanish and some other officials urge a focus on development and reconstruction efforts, saying combat operations are more likely to alienate the Afghan population. But this approach provides little solace in those areas where the Taliban and other insurgent groups control territory. Second, many European leaders hold back because of low support for the Afghanistan mission at home. A recent German Marshall Fund poll found that 75 percent of Germans, 70 percent of Italians, and 72 percent of Spaniards did not support the deployment of their troops for combat operations in Afghanistan.²² So most NATO countries have established caveats, which restrict their soldiers' rules of engagement and limit their deployments to relatively safe areas of the country.

But U.S. handwringing misses the bigger picture. Many NATO countries have no recent experience in sustained ground combat operations. It is foolhardy to expect that soldiers with no meaningful experience can successfully defeat a networked insurgency comprised of hardened Taliban, al Qa'ida operatives, and other insurgent groups. U.S. forces have been battling insurgents in Afghanistan for seven years and Iraq for five, whereas most of the allies have only been seriously engaged for the past two years, and are not as far along in the learning curve. Indeed, NATO has always been a two-tiered alliance. During the Cold War, the U.S. military agreed to play the predominant role in countering a Soviet ground or air attack in Western Europe. The United States also provided a nuclear umbrella across most of Western Europe to protect against a Soviet nuclear attack.

²² German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo (Italy), *Transatlantic Trends: Key Findings 2007* (Washington, DC: German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo, 2007).

III. Room for Improvement

What does this mean for the United States in practice? How can the United States and NATO better collaborate with the United Nations, the European Union, and non-governmental organizations?

First, the United States needs to take the lead for counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan's east and south – the center of gravity of the insurgency. NATO can continue to play a critical role, especially such countries as Canada and Britain in the south. But long-term success in Afghanistan will require the United States to provide the bulk of international forces and development assistance. Nobel prize-winning economist Mancur Olson coined this paradox the collective action problem. He argued that rational actors typically don't work to achieve their common interests in pursuit of public goods. Individuals in any group attempting collective action, such as NATO, will have incentives to "free ride" on the efforts of others. Someone always needs to provide the public good. It is now clear that the United States has to provide the public good, working with the Afghan government and a few key allies such as Britain and Canada.

This includes Afghan police training, which Germany was supposed to lead beginning in 2002. The United States is also deploying over 3,000 Marines to southern Afghanistan. Unfortunately, international resources are still not adequate. NATO has roughly 50,000 troops in Afghanistan, along with more than 50,000 Afghan National Army soldiers. Based on classic counterinsurgency estimates that a minimum of four troops per 1,000 inhabitants is necessary to establish security, the requirement in Afghanistan is at least 128,000 soldiers. This leaves a gap of 28,000 soldiers, which Afghan soldiers can fill over time. In the near future, however, the U.S. military must fill this gap if the Afghan government is to have a chance at defeating insurgent groups. This requires making difficult choices, such as redeploying some U.S. forces from Iraq to Afghanistan.

Second, military command-and-control arrangements are problematic and somewhat inefficient, though I don't believe that the command-and-control structure will ultimately cause the success (or failure) of U.S. efforts in Afghanistan. There are at least three separate U.S. chains of command: through U.S. European Command (EUCOM), Central Command (CENTCOM), and Special Operations Command (SOCOM). Ideally, there should be one U.S. commander of forces in Afghanistan who is dual-hatted and has command-and-control of all forces. In my view, this could be done either under EUCOM or CENTCOM.

Third, in some nation-building operations, such as the one carried out in Bosnia following the signing of the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords, the international community created a High Representative to oversee reconstruction and stabilization. This did not happen in Afghanistan on

either the civilian or military side. On the civilian side, there has been no unity of command among the international community or U.S. agencies. The appointment of Norwegian diplomat Kai Eide as the United Nations Special Representative in Kabul may help improve these efforts. Still, there are problems even among U.S. agencies to coordinate reconstruction and development assistance. Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) in Afghanistan remain dominated by soldiers, with sparsely few civilian personnel from the State Department, U.S. Agency for International Development, and other U.S. government agencies. Recent efforts to triple the size of the State Department in Afghanistan – especially at locations such as PRTs – appear to have run into bureaucratic resistance within the State Department. This needs to change.

IV. Room for Hope

There is clearly room for hope in Afghanistan. According to a recent public opinion poll, many Afghans express optimism in the face of the country's difficulties, though Afghan support is decreasing. Approximately 71 percent of Afghans support the United States' presence in Afghanistan. Most Afghans continue to see the U.S.-led overthrow of the Taliban as a good thing – 76 percent, although down from 88 percent last year – and to support U.S. forces remaining in their country. And 65 percent of Afghans still view the United States favorably overall, down from a peak of 83 percent in 2005 but still remarkable compared with America's image in most other Muslim countries.²³ The key now is to take advantage of a shrinking window of opportunity by providing adequate resources and coordination. America's war on terrorism began in Afghanistan in 2001 when it overthrew the Taliban regime. It is time for the United States to finish what it started.

²³ ABC News / BBC / ARD, *Afghanistan: Where Things Stand* (New York: ABC / BBC / ARD, December 2007).